



Literature in the Digital Age: From Close Reading to Digital Reading

Video transcript

How do we read today? Offline and online, print book and ebook

PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER:

Welcome back. One of the first things to consider when we ask ourselves how we read literature in the digital age is to ask what media we use when we read literature. I'll devote a whole week of this course to the question of the materiality of communication, that is, the question of how the physical qualities, the internal structures and technological operations of various media affect us in different ways. For now, let me just draw your attention to the objects that lie here on this table. There's a print book, a tablet computer, an e-book reader, and a smartphone. These are some of the major media in which many of us read literary texts today.

And the question I have when I look at these different media is this: what difference does it make whether I read, say, a short story, a novel in a print book, on a tablet computer, an e-book reader, or a smartphone? Let's start with the most traditional reading medium, the print book. When we read literature in a hardback or a paperback edition, we usually withdraw to immerse ourselves in the text's fictional world. And we withdraw ourselves not only in our homes, but also in public spaces. We do not interrupt someone who is reading a novel on the train.

Things are different if you read your literary text on a tablet computer.

Often this is still solitary reading, as with a print book, but it's a very different kind of solitary reading that has a different kind of rhythm, especially when your tablet is hooked up to the internet. Chances are that if you read a novel or a short story on a tablet, your reading will be more frequently interrupted, be it because you feel a sudden urge to go on Facebook, or check your mail, or because your novel is set in Brooklyn, and you want to see some photographs of Brooklyn to get a better sense of the place.

In either case, our immersion in the fictional world is interrupted and as we return to the literary texts, the images and texts we've seen on Facebook or Google Images will shape our reading experience. Things are different yet again with e-book readers.



Here the text is cut up into smaller chunks, and page numbers are irrelevant because the text is what is called reflowable, to allow for the use of the same text on multiple devices. E-book readers also have a tendency to tell you how much time, how many hours and minutes you have left till you finish the novel, and at least one e-book reader tells you which passages other readers have found most interesting. And of course, with an e-book reader, you can carry thousands of books with you. How do these things affect our reading experience? Consider, finally, reading a novel or a short story on a smartphone.

Well, not many people really read novels on smartphones, simply because the chunks of text are so small that it becomes cumbersome. So, the smartphone seems more suitable for shorter texts, such as short stories and poems, Twitter poems, for instance. In comparison with the e-book our mobility is further increased, but so are the chances that we're distracted, say, by a phone call or a text message. So clearly, then, reading literary texts in different media means reading literary texts differently. We could even say that it means reading a different literary text. And one of the questions that we'll keep coming back throughout the course is this: what different cognitive and social effects do different reading media have on us?